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SUBJECT: BELGIAN INTERIOR MINISTER PUSHING FOR EXPANDED
SECURITY SERVICE AUTHORITY

Classified By: Ambassador Sam Fox, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a one-on-one lunch held January 17, 2008, Belgian Interior Minister Dewael told the Ambassador he would press for passage of new legislation that would expand the authority of the country's intelligence services to use "special investigative techniques" like wiretaps. Law enforcement agencies now have such authority, which they can exercise only in connection with an active criminal case, and with a magistrate's permission. Dewael praised USG cooperation with Belgium on counter-terrorism issues, pledging to resolve any difficulties brought to his attention. He praised USG support for the Belgian authorities in connection with the anti-terrorism alert started on December 21, 2007. End summary

¶2. (SBU) Patrick Dewael, who became Interior Minister after the 2004 regional elections, is one of the "holdover" ministers in the current interim government. A Limburger, he is a generational and professional contemporary of Prime Minister Verhofstadt. Once Verhofstadt leaves the Prime Ministership on March 23, local observers expect Dewael to exercise an even larger leadership role in the Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD). He and the Ambassador met on January 17 to discuss counter-terrorism issues and the current political scene. Septel will cover the continuing effort to put together the post-March 23 government.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked Dewael specifically to comment on his future plans for strengthening Belgium's ability to fight terrorism. Dewael welcomed the question, noting that it was important to increase Belgian capabilities on both the law enforcement and intelligence collection side of the ledger. He said his priority was to help ease restrictions on the domestic activities of Belgium's security services, notably by making it possible for the intelligence agencies to use wiretaps on domestic targets in connection with intelligence cases. At present, only law enforcement agencies can use wiretaps, break into private residences to plant listening devices, or permit informants to commit minor crimes as part of ongoing investigations. The security service is seeking a similar authority to act without tying intelligence collection to an ongoing criminal investigation.

¶4. (C) To bring about change, Dewael said he was working to secure passage of legislation before the interim government ended its term, which was now scheduled for March 23. The previous government had introduced a similar bill, but it proved impossible to get the measure through Parliament before the last election in June 2007. The Ambassador welcomed this news, adding that the lack of such authority was worrisome to the U.S. The limited capability of Belgian services has created, he argued, a potential vulnerability that terrorists certainly would seek to exploit. The Minister agreed, arguing that recent developments like the December 21 alert had increased public awareness of the threat.

¶5. (SBU) Dewael was scathing in his criticism of those who had attacked the decision to impose a higher level of security on December 21. He said he looked forward to an investigation of the matter by the joint parliamentary committees on Intelligence and the Police. U.S. support prior to and after December 21 had been crucial in informing the Belgian government's decision making process.

¶6. (U) The meeting closed with Dewael pledging to help the Embassy in any way he could. He urged us to remain in touch with him and with his key staff, which had not changed during the government transition. Fox

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